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ABSTRACT

This brief digest reviews research findings on achieving racial integration in desegregated magnet schools. Studies show that resegregation tends to occur in most schools after desegregation as a result of tracking and ability grouping; furthermore, as the numbers of blacks rise in a school, the resegregation in classrooms tends to rise. A number of cooperative learning techniques have recently been developed which seem to work well in the integrated, heterogeneous classroom and are found to have a positive effect on race relations and achievement. Newly desegregated schools are found to expel a disproportionately high number of black students and, in general, discipline of these students is found to be more severe than with white students. Here again, cooperative learning techniques are found to build a more positive climate and reduce suspensions. Blacks and other minorities are heavily represented in compensatory education classes which, because they are pull-out programs, tend to increase resegregation. In planning desegregated magnet schools, it appears useful to: (1) maintain a mixed stable student body, (2) include children of different abilities in each classroom, (3) avoid tracking, (4) encourage interracial contact in academic and extracurricular activities, (5) recruit teachers and principals who are concerned with racial equality, (6) initiate staff development programs dealing with desegregation, and (7) involve parents in classroom instruction. (CG)

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Creating Racial Integration in a Desegregated Magnet School

Federal support for school desegregation has recently narrowed to a single strategy: magnet schools. Though their overall effectiveness is questionable when used as the only means of desegregation and when not bolstered by a mandatory desegregation plan (Rossell, 1985), the widespread use of magnets to promote desegregation makes it important to find ways to make them effective. This brief report reviews the practical issues in planning magnets that go beyond building-level desegregation to achieve actual integration of the classroom and other school activities.

The Ratio of Black Students to White Students

Resegregation appears to occur within most schools after they undergo desegregation (Eyler et al., 1983). Largely because of tracking and ability grouping, blacks find themselves in classes with a majority of black students, while whites are in mostly white classes. Resegregation tends to increase as the proportion of blacks rises (Epstein, 1980). However, under token desegregation, black and white students also tend to have little contact with each other. Even when the students are open to intergroup relations, blacks are not present in a high enough proportion to be able to interact with the majority of white students. Moreover, when there are only small numbers of black students, as a group they are unlikely to gain influence within the school; feeling alienated, they tend to cluster together (Schofield and Sagar, 1983).

Although the status of whites and blacks approaches equality when the student body is roughly half black and half white, racial hostility also appears to be highest in just such situations. Thus Schofield and Sagar (1983) recommend two different enrollment ratios as conducive to good race relations: either 20-40 percent black, or 60 percent black.

Tracking vs. Heterogeneous Classes

The common solution to the problem of teaching a large, academically diverse student body is to use tracking and ability grouping. At first glance, homogeneous groupings seem advantageous, given that racial prejudice appears to be lowest and interracial friendships are most likely to occur when students perceive each other as similar socioeconomically and in their achievement (Schofield and Sagar, 1983). However, because there are more white students in higher tracks and more minority students in lower tracks, homogeneous ability groups resegregate students. Equal status contacts between black and white students may be more likely in a heterogeneous classroom of a thoroughly integrated school.

A number of cooperative learning techniques have recently been developed for such heterogeneous classroom situations (Slavin, 1985). Using teams of both racially and academically mixed students who work together on problems and encourage each other, these strategies show an overall positive effect on race relations as well as achievement (Ascher, 1986; Schofield and Sagar, 1983). Through cooperative learning, students also increase their self-esteem, confidence, and concern for others (Ascher, 1986).

Suspensions

Newly desegregated schools suspend and expel a disproportionate number of black students, particularly when black enrollment rises above 15 percent. Schools with an equal mix of black and white students appear most likely to discipline students in ways that resegregate them, including by pushing some out of school entirely (Eyler et al., 1983).

In general, black students are suspended for offenses that would be allowed white students, or for which white students would be given lighter penalties, including smoking, nonviolent disruptive acts, subordination, and attendance violations such as cutting class, truancy and tardiness. The negative consequences of suspensions include loss of instructional time, feelings of failure and rejection that may lead to dropping out, higher levels of daytime juvenile delinquency and crime, and the loss of parental and community support for the schools.

In-school alternatives to suspension, including counseling programs, time-out rooms, in-school suspension centers, and alternative schools, have been tried in many districts. Although these programs keep students within the school building, there is little evidence that they are less demoralizing to the students (and thus less likely to push them toward dropping out), or that they work against resegregation (Eyler et al., 1983).

Instructional strategies such as cooperative learning, which avoid tracking and rigid ability grouping, appear to be effective in building a more positive organizational climate, improving cooperative behavior, and reducing suspensions. In addition, three effective schooling strategies — the leadership of the school principal, the orderliness of the school environment, and the belief and interest of teachers in their students — also help to decrease suspensions (Eyler et al., 1983; Wu et al., 1982).

Compensatory Education

Blacks and other minorities are heavily represented in compensatory education. These students usually spend a quarter of their learning time in Title I and other similar programs. During this time they miss the regular instruction in many subjects and are brought into largely segregated situations where teaching is not clearly superior to that of the regular classroom (Carter, 1983). Using such "pull-out" programs for compensatory education is not supported on achievement grounds, particularly when the resegregative effects of this approach are considered (Eyler et al., 1983). A few mainstream alternatives have been tried, but not many have been evaluated.

Improving Race Relations and Achievement

Special education, bilingual education, dropout prevention, extra-curricular activities, and a variety of other features of magnet school programs need to be carefully planned to optimize harmonious interracial contacts. Both administrators and teachers must be aware of the liabilities, as well as benefits, of each decision they make.

Drawing on research on improving both race relations and achievement in desegregated schools, Hawley (1981) recommends that schools:

- Maintain a relatively stable student body, with school and classrooms neither predominantly white nor predominantly black.
- Assign to each classroom a sizeable number of children who perform at or above grade level.
- Avoid academic competition and rigid forms of tracking or ability grouping that draw attention to individual and group achievement differences that are correlated with race.
- Encourage substantial interaction among races both in academic settings and in extracurricular activities.
- Recruit teachers and principals who are unprejudiced, supportive, and insistent on high performance and racial equality.
- Initiate programs of staff development that emphasize the problems relating to successful desegregation.
- Involve parents in classroom instructional activities.

— Carol Ascher

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